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ABSTRACT

This paper cites several examples of the outcomes assessment activities taking place on college campuses and their impact on the freshman educational experience. Outcomes assessment is viewed as the impetus for faculty to make responsive improvements in higher education practices. Improvements derived from assessment activities are being implemented in the areas of registration and preregistration, advising and student-faculty contact, computer usage, emphasis on basic skills, general education, staff development, student-student contact, and curriculum-related matters. Includes 14 references. (JDD)

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LINKING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT AND THE FRESHMAN EXPERIENCE

Remarks Prepared For
The Annual Conference
of the
Freshman Year Experience
Columbia, South Carolina

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Linking Outcomes Assessment and the Freshman Experience

Trudy W. Banta

Some of us derive our best understanding of the freshman experience when our own children become freshmen. As I began to think about what I would say to you today, I recalled some of the things we heard from our daughter when she left home in the fall of 1988 to attend a large public university in another state. I have assembled in a single letter a number of the concerns she expressed during her crucial first year of college. They will sound very familiar to you.

Dear Mother:

My French teacher speaks nothing but French in class, and refuses to talk to us in English. I tried to change to another section, but after standing in the drop/add line for over two hours, I found that all the other sections were closed. I'm going to fail French.

I've been to the advising center, and the people there are nice, but I never see the same advisor twice. And I never see any of my instructors after class is over. Will anyone here ever get to know me?

All my papers have to be typed. I need help in learning to use my word processor. I'm also having trouble solving my genetics problems. Where should I go for help?

My humanities professor says I'm too wordy. But he doesn't give specific examples, so I'm not sure how to correct that.

Some of the people in the administrative offices here seem to have no patience with students.

I enjoyed our trip to Italy in high school. I hope I can learn more about people from other countries.

I'm taking one course that is a total surprise. It is nothing like the description in the catalog.

Some of the week-ends here are so long and depressing. I miss you.

Love,
Holly

To paraphrase a lyric from The Little River Band, "Hang on, Holly. Help is on the way."

The Upcraft-Gardner book, The Freshman Year Experience [12], is a delightful compendium of research and suggestions for good practice in higher education. If all faculty took its contents seriously, the freshman year and all of the college experience would be much improved. Unfortunately, my experience suggests that many faculty are convinced that good teachers and administrators are born, not made, that we need little or no training for this work, and that our own experience is our best teacher. After all, if a scholar is staying current in the field, he or she can lecture to students and they will learn. Isn't that the prevailing wisdom? These individuals could read The Freshman Year Experience, assimilate the good ideas there, implement them, and start helping freshmen today. But they are far more likely to continue doing what they are doing in the classroom, or at best, undertake their own studies, which will take years, and thus put off action indefinitely. Unfortunately, those who refuse to profit from the experience of others are condemned to repeat it.

Now there is a new development that I believe is stimulating a good deal of self-study by academics and impelling them to make immediate improvements in academic programs and services. Program evaluation, or outcomes assessment as it came to be called in the '80s, has been brought to higher education primarily by external parties who believe that all who provide public services should be held accountable for their use of taxpayers' funds. Public schools and social service agencies have been required to furnish evidence of their effectiveness since the 1960s. But the tradition of managing its own affairs enabled higher education to avoid intense public scrutiny until the early 1980s.

A comprehensive outcomes assessment program involves the use of multiple sources of evaluative data, such as comprehensive exams for students, surveys for students and alumni, and interviews with all concerned. Information from all of these sources is then used to suggest needed improvements. The latest Campus Trends survey [5] conducted by Elaine El-Khawas at the American Council on Education indicates that 70 percent of the nation's campuses, up from 50 percent just a year ago, are now engaged in assessment activities. Many of the improvements that are being made as a result of this work are designed to make the freshman year a more valuable and satisfying experience for students.

I would like to provide some illustrations of this point. In doing that, I will draw upon a national sample of institutions, but will rely most heavily on the experience of colleges and universities in my own state of Tennessee and in the neighboring state of Virginia. In 1979, Tennessee became the first state to base the allocation of a portion of state funds for higher education on evidence of program quality as gathered through assessment activity. The state of Virginia followed Tennessee in 1985 with requests for assessment proposals and plans from all its public institutions.

As editor of the national publication Assessment Update, I receive descriptions of assessment activities that are underway in institutions all over the country. In addition,

As editor of the national publication Assessment Update, I receive descriptions of assessment activities that are underway in institutions all over the country. In addition, over the last five years I have visited campuses in twenty-two states to assist them with their own assessment programs, and have attempted to keep in touch to find out what they have learned in the process of getting started.

In the following sections, I have taken each of my daughter's freshman concerns and provided examples of improvements recently undertaken on one or more campuses as a result of assessment activities.

Registration and Preregistration

At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, students' dissatisfaction with not being able to get the classes they needed during registration spurred the administration to undertake a committed effort to preregister undergraduates for courses several months prior to the beginning of each term. Preregistration permitted the university to let students know in advance if they had obtained the courses they wanted. Then the students could register for substitute courses if necessary in a less harried environment than had prevailed when opportunities to drop and add were available only during the first week of each new term. Improvements in registration have also taken place at Clinch Valley College of the University of Virginia as a result of responses to its student opinion survey (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989). Several colleges in Virginia have used student responses to the survey item, "I can't get the classes I need," to justify requests for more staff in key courses such as freshman English and mathematics.

Advising and Student-Faculty Contact

Students and alumni alike complain more about advising than almost any other academic function. At the University of Tennessee at Martin, a semester-long freshman studies course with the advisor as instructor was one response to students' concerns about advising. At Austin Peay State University in Tennessee, black students were less satisfied than others with the quality of their advising, so the university sponsored sensitivity training to assist advisors in responding appropriately to the concerns of black students (Banta, 1990).

At UT, Knoxville, we have reinstituted mandatory advising following a period during the 1970s when students were given the responsibility of advising themselves. We have begun to provide formal training for faculty advisors and to give them packages of accurate and up-to-date printed material about programs and services to which they may refer students. The Departments of Human Services and Psychology, and the College

of Business, are experimenting with peer advising. We are also suggesting that departments identify small groups of experienced and committed faculty to handle most of the student advising, rather than ask all faculty to do this. Some faculty simply will never be good advisors, no matter how much training they receive.

In many Virginia colleges, students at risk of dropping out are identified for their advisors, who then can give them special attention. In addition, the student database being developed at many institutions for assessment purposes will furnish information about students that should be helpful in advising. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia has targeted widespread problems like advising for special supplemental funding in its Funds for Excellence program (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989).

At UT, Knoxville, we administer annual surveys by mail in which we ask our enrolled students questions about how often they see faculty members outside class, and how many faculty members know them well enough to write a recommendation for them. Then we provide summaries of the students' responses for incorporation in the self-study for a program review that each department undergoes every seven years. For each department we supply its own mean student ratings and compare those with the averages for its college and for the university in general. As a result of comparing themselves with college and campus averages, many departments have been spurred to make responsive changes (Banta & Fisher, 1989).

In perhaps no other area has the change been more widespread than in the area of faculty-student involvement. Several departments have re-activated or established student clubs and professional associations and encouraged faculty to become involved in the programming for those organizations. Special-interest living-learning centers have been established in residence halls to bring faculty and students together for meals and special programs. These centers also promote student-to-student friendships. We have seen several new initiatives undertaken to involve undergraduates in faculty research. After all, that is where the research university is supposed to offer its greatest benefits for students, isn't it? Some departments have established new honor societies, others have involved students in more faculty meetings, and the Department of Electrical Engineering gave its undergraduates the opportunity to develop a newsletter to be mailed to graduates of the program.

In 1983, 47 percent of the undergraduates responding to our mailed survey said they did not know a single faculty member well enough to ask them for a recommendation. Partly as a result of the efforts to increase faculty-student contact that have been made by departments acting on the basis of assessment findings, that 47 percent figure dropped to 25 percent last year. That is still higher than we would like, but it represents a rather dramatic improvement in student perceptions.

At the State Technical Institute in Memphis, surveys showed that students perceived a pronounced lack of communication between students and the administration. The president and his staff made some changes. Now leaders of the student government association hold open forums and maintain office hours so that they can learn about current student concerns. Then the president and his staff meet at least twice a semester with SGA leaders to have lunch and talk about the students' concerns. In addition, the president holds an open forum each semester to give every student an opportunity for direct access to the campus administration. As a result of this increased communication, students on that Memphis campus now have better lighting in parking areas, some courses on weekends that were not available before, and a new procedure for student evaluation of instruction (Banta, 1990).

Computer Usage

One of the major objectives for incoming freshmen during the decade of the '80s was to increase their computer literacy. Many surveys show that we have been at least somewhat successful in our efforts, as students report far more use of computers now than they did five years ago. This achievement has been expensive, but essential. In fact, students interviewed recently in our office about their most positive learning experiences at UT, Knoxville, often mentioned the computing skills they had acquired.

Like their colleagues on many other campuses, faculty at the State Technical Institute in Memphis have increased their contacts with business and industry so that instructors may learn from state-of-the-art computer users how best to apply and teach computer technology. State Tech has updated its software, broadened student access to the mainframe computer, and increased the number of assignments that require students to use computers (Banta, 1990). At UT, Knoxville, student access to the mainframe is now available for every student free of charge. At James Madison University in Virginia the response to student concerns about computer literacy has led to the establishment of a computer literacy program to develop the skills of students and instructors in word processing, conducting computerized library searches, and applying computer technology in courses. The State Council for Higher Education of Virginia has made computing training another target, along with advising, of its Funds for Excellence program (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989).

Emphasis on Basic Skills

Placement exams for freshmen have become major tools in higher education assessment programs. In the last five years, far more attention has been placed on students' entering levels of ability than had been the case heretofore. For instance, the New Jersey Test of Basic Skills revealed that only 16 percent of high school seniors in

New Jersey were ready to solve even the simplest algebra problems. Under the leadership of Charles Pine, a physics professor at Rutgers, and others, mathematics instructors have rethought the way algebra is taught, both in high school and in college ("Student Preparedness," 1988). Now, the figure of 16 percent ready to solve simple algebra problems has been increased to 47 percent. Plans are underway to retest college students after they complete remedial math courses taught using some of the new methods that have been so successful in the high schools. At least in New Jersey, as a result of basic skills assessment activities, freshmen have benefited from new methods of instruction and now are better prepared for college level mathematics.

At Longwood College in Virginia, mathematics has been added as a pre-requisite for more courses. This response was prompted by faculty recognition of the fact that preparation in mathematics is essential for perhaps two-thirds of today's major fields (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989).

Writing is a skill area about which students themselves have expressed increased concern. The UCLA Freshman Survey annually shows that freshmen across the country are less confident about their writing skills than about many other areas of preparation (Astin, Korn & Berz, 1989). As a result, faculty at UT, Martin and a number of other universities and colleges have added a writing emphasis to selected courses across the curriculum and have provided faculty development experiences to improve the instructional skills of those teaching these classes. At Austin Peay State University in Tennessee it was the assessment component of structured interviews with faculty that created the impetus for a renewed emphasis on instruction in writing (Banta, 1990).

At the State Technical Institute at Memphis, contact with freshmen revealed that they wanted more detailed information about their writing errors, their grammar, and their spelling errors. The faculty responded by taking action to increase the amount of information they were providing on students' papers (Banta, 1990).

UT Knoxville seniors in Religious Studies were turning in seminar papers that indicated to the faculty a need for more experience and assistance with writing at earlier levels (Linge, 1990). In discussions at a retreat, faculty decided to require more drafts of papers in lower division courses to increase students' opportunities to revise their work with faculty assistance. Assessment findings at Clinch Valley College in Virginia have led to the hiring of a developmental education specialist to improve the math and English remediation experiences afforded on that campus (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989).

Oral communication skills have also been found to be lacking among entry-level students. At State Tech in Memphis, dissatisfaction with oral communication skills has led instructors to require that students make more oral presentations in class (Banta, 1990). At Clinch Valley College, National Teacher Exam scores demonstrated the need for education students to obtain more practice of their oral communication skills, and this prompted responsive changes across the curriculum (The Virginia Plan for Higher

Education, 1989, 1989). Seniors at UT Knoxville have described opportunities to read their papers in class as prompts for discussion with classmates as one of their most positive learning experiences.

In the state of Virginia, assessment findings have stimulated a much more concentrated effort to identify students who lack college level skills. In addition, more systematic student tracking is underway in an effort to see how remedial efforts are working and how well community colleges are preparing their students for senior colleges. At UT Knoxville, high risk freshmen have been identified by their responses to the UCLA Freshman Survey conducted annually in the fall, and this has allowed us to place these students in seminars for no more than 15 students each, where they will receive special help with basic skills.

General Education

At many colleges, assessment programs began with a look at students' general education experiences. Clinch Valley College, for instance, has analyzed its general education curriculum for a match between the faculty's stated goals for general education and actual academic experiences for students. Several Virginia institutions have redefined general education in terms of what students should know and be able to do, as opposed to a simple listing of the courses they should take (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989).

Around the country, a combination of standardized exams and faculty-developed tests has been used to see what students know in the humanities, social science, and natural science. Some of the most interesting work is being done at Kean College in New Jersey, where faculty have developed questions for general education assessment and placed them in a variety of course exams (Ross & Weiss, 1989). The items are first read by the instructor for purposes of assigning a course grade. Then a faculty evaluation committee looks at students' responses across classes for clues about strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum. This is called course-embedded assessment.

At Longwood College, assessment of general education has produced a new curriculum with ten content area goals and nine skills, with new courses designed to deliver the content and skills. The University of Tennessee at Martin now has clearer course objectives for knowledge and skills and the learning activities to promote these. At Austin Peay State University, scores on the ACT COMP exam that were lower than the faculty desired spurred an interest in a new interdisciplinary core for general education. Roane State Community College in Tennessee has added more humanities study to its curriculum after reviewing students' scores on the COMP exam (Banta, 1990).

At UT, Knoxville, our study of students' COMP exam scores over several years has caused us to increase the proportion of our curriculum devoted to general education, to strengthen our social science requirements, and to experiment with teaching problem-solving skills across the curriculum (Banta et al., 1989).

Staff Development

At UT, Martin, low student ratings of personnel in administrative offices led the administration to establish semester-long workshops in human relations. Both trainees and students are now more satisfied with administrative responsiveness (Banta, 1990).

An early student survey finding at UT, Knoxville, was that graduate teaching assistants received lower survey ratings from students on a number of teaching effectiveness items than did faculty. Partially as a result of these ratings, a week-long seminar for graduate teaching assistants was established by our Learning Research Center. This seminar helps the GTAs set course objectives, develop a class syllabus, organize classroom presentations, guide discussion, write exam questions, and counsel individual students. Following the third year of this program, GTA ratings exceeded those for faculty on one-third of the teaching effectiveness items.

Another outcome of our assessment program at UTK is the result of faculty experience in developing comprehensive exams for seniors. After meeting together to talk about the comprehensive assessment process, faculty have realized that they need help in developing objectives for their programs and for their courses; in organizing curriculum and courses according to these objectives; in developing assignments and test items that tap higher order intellectual skills such as reasoning and problem solving; in constructing more reliable and more imaginative assessments of student performance. Our Learning Research Center has responded to several departmental requests for related faculty development experiences. One result of these programs is that more innovative approaches to assessment have emerged in recent years, including an in-basket exercise for dieticians, a field experience evaluation in social work and child and family studies, design of an ad campaign by seniors in advertising, critique of a videotape by theatre majors, and the use of external examiners in religious studies.

Student-Student Contact

St. Norbert College in Wisconsin has used survey results to make dramatic changes in the composition of its student body and in the intellectual challenge provided by its programs (Webb, 1984). In 1973, only 23 percent of the students agreed that "most of the students here are of very high calibre academically." Ten years later, 63 percent agreed with this statement, following a remarkable change in student recruiting and

retention strategies. In another reflection of the extent to which the academic climate changed, in 1973 only 22 percent of the students agreed that "there is keen competition among most students for high grades." Ten years later this percentage had increased to 46. Another indicator of change was the decrease from 31 percent in 1973 to 5 percent in 1983 in student agreement with the statement, "not enough work is required in courses."

Making students aware of cultural differences--increasing multicultural awareness--is an objective being promoted at colleges and universities across the country. As the result of its assessment activity, James Madison University discovered a need for more effort in this area, and elected to respond by establishing international living-learning centers and increasing the number and variety of study-abroad programs (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989).

Course and Curriculum-Related Matters

All of the work with comprehensive exams and surveys has come together to create a healthy ferment in academe about ways to organize courses and curricula. Not many of us have the luxury of being able to add new staff members these days, but at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee the standardized test given to seniors in psychology reflected a real gap in students' learning in social psychology. The faculty had been requesting a staff member in this area for some time, but it was not until the evidence of low test scores was presented to the administration that the go-ahead was given to hire a new person in social psychology (Banta, 1990).

At UT Knoxville, students' dissatisfaction with the accuracy of catalog descriptions of courses, as expressed in assessment survey responses, has led a number of departments to reexamine their sections of the catalog, and to make some changes. We hope these changes will help to increase the congruence between what freshmen expect when they choose courses and majors, and what they actually experience at UTK.

Student interest has encouraged faculty at several colleges to update paths through the curriculum to provide specialty areas that have more contemporary appeal to students. For instance, at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, the Department of Sociology has updated its list of minors, and at UT, Knoxville, our sociology department is offering new areas of concentration in criminal justice and the environment and society. Professional options such as rehabilitation counseling and deaf education are being used to guide course selection in our Department of Human Services. At Christopher Newport College in Virginia, the Department of Political Science has added minors in Latin American studies and legal studies (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989). A few departments are taking more cognizance of the fact that some majors want to go to graduate school, while others intend to terminate their

education at the baccalaureate level, by providing separate tracks through the curriculum for students with these divergent goals.

Also in response to expressions of student interest on assessment instruments, the College of William and Mary has decided to include more women's studies and feminist perspectives in its philosophy courses (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989). A notable response to assessment findings has been to add senior capstone courses that will provide an integrative curriculum experience as well as an opportunity to gauge student achievement in a setting that promotes active student involvement in the assessment process. UT Knoxville, James Madison University and Longwood College, all have increased in the last five years the number of majors in which senior capstone courses are offered.

At UT, Knoxville, the Department of Anthropology has increased its curricular requirements to offer more breadth in the discipline (Bass, 1990). Our Department of Human Services has decided to offer several sections of each required course so that students will have a choice of instructors (McClam, 1989). This will enable students to select those professors whose approaches to instruction best fit their own learning styles.

These are but a few illustrations of the changes in course requirements and curricula that have resulted on our own campus from assessment activities. In addition, faculty have increased the structure for courses through the use of objectives that are shared with students. Goals and objectives for entire programs have grown out of discussions concerning appropriate comprehensive assessment strategies. Due to increased agreement about what should be going on in the curriculum, there is more consistency among faculty in teaching core courses, and connections are being made more consciously between the content of lower- and upper-division courses (Banta et al., 1989).

At James Madison University some interesting responses to assessment findings have occurred in the Department of Dance (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989). Over 30 percent of intermediate jazz students were found to be capable of profiting from an advanced class. This discovery has been used to fuel a campaign for an advanced jazz class. In addition, some intermediate ballet students are being kept at that level due to their low class rank, even though they may really be ready for advanced work. This has led to the suggestion that students be promoted on the basis of a skill assessment rather than class rank.

At James Madison 85 percent of the faculty in the Department of Audiology and Speech Pathology report that they have made changes in their courses due to assessment findings. In the Department of Physics there, efforts are underway to improve student understanding of thermodynamics, an area exposed as one of relative weakness on the basis of scores on the comprehensive exam for seniors. In the Theatre Department, there is more formal and informal dialogue in classes and more evaluation of theatrical

productions, thus giving students opportunities to apply in practical settings the knowledge they have gained in their classes.

At UT, Knoxville, the opportunity to apply knowledge has been increased by the use of computer simulations in psychology classes. Psychology faculty have also designed a new comprehensive exam to permit seniors to exhibit more complex intellectual skills during this culminating experience.

As might be expected, the construction of exams at the senior level has spurred a great deal of activity designed to improve student outcome assessment overall. At UT Martin, the Department of Chemistry has instituted common course exams in an effort to insure standards of quality across sections (Banta, 1990). At Longwood College in Virginia, Kean College in New Jersey, and elsewhere, curriculum-embedded assessment is being developed, with exam responses read twice--once for a grade in the course and a second time by a committee charged with the responsibility for program evaluation. In a response to National Teacher Exam scores and survey findings, students preparing to be teachers at Longwood College now receive more information about classroom tests and their development in the required measurement course. In addition, a course on classroom management has been added to the curriculum (The Virginia Plan for Higher Education, 1989, 1989).

At UT Knoxville, our Center for Assessment Research and Development issues each spring a request for proposals from faculty for assessment-related research. Ways to improve their comprehensive exams for seniors have been undertaken by faculty in engineering, French, nursing, journalism, accounting and psychology with support from this mini-grant program. Moreover, the experience of developing the comprehensive exam has led several departments to ask for help from the Learning Research Center in improving faculty skills in developing their own course exams.

As part of an external examiner project conducted by the Association of American Colleges, Bowdoin, Wellesley, and Wesleyan colleges developed a new way of examining their students: A faculty-student retreat with questions for students, then for faculty, about the field of economics ("Making Connections," 1989). Two students were paired with one faculty member during the retreat. First, the faculty member asked the students integrative questions about the discipline; then it was the students' turn to question faculty about concepts they wanted to discuss. The faculty found that the students were not very skillful at integrating what they had learned in several courses. This caused faculty to consider ways to strengthen that ability through class activities. At Wesleyan College, for instance, a senior capstone seminar is being viewed as a possible vehicle for fostering integrative skills. In addition, the faculty-student retreats at Wellesley have caused the faculty to begin to address students' desires for increased coverage of race and gender issues and perspectives in the curriculum.

Overall, the AAC project concluded that capstone seminars and oral exams are significant educational experiences for students, primarily because students feel affirmed in the sustained conversations with faculty that occur in these settings.

At SUNY Fredonia three new essay items have been constructed to give students an opportunity to show what they know about general education ("Fredonia Designs," 1989). And at William and Mary portfolios of student work collected over a series of courses are being used to assess progress toward general education goals.

As a final illustration of a curriculum-related response to assessment findings, the UT Knoxville psychology department has begun to provide increased recognition for academic excellence by placing more emphasis on its honor society, creating additional awards for scholarship, and publicizing extraordinary student achievements more widely.

Conclusion

Most of the things that are occurring in response to assessment findings are commonly acknowledged as good practice in higher education. They are described in journal articles and in books such as Upcraft and Gardner's The Freshman Year Experience (Upcraft, Gardner & Associates, 1989). For many faculty, however, these suggestions for good practice will simply remain unread words on a page in the absence of some impetus to pay attention to them. The call for outcomes assessment and responsive improvements that is currently abroad in the land is providing that impetus for many faculty.

Before closing, rather than leave you wondering, I want to reassure you about Holly. In doing so, I apologize in advance for a distressing lack of modesty in describing my children's accomplishments. First of all, I confess that she was never really a freshman because her Advanced Placement credit allowed her to enter as a sophomore. And the large out-of-state public university she chose turned out to be a very good place for her.

She selected for her residence hall an international living-learning center where she has several opportunities each week to learn first-hand about people's experiences in other countries.

She is doing well in French, she now has a permanent advisor who is helpful, and she has taken several non-credit workshops that have given her considerable skill in word processing.

She plans to finish her biology major in 2 and one-half years go immediately to law school, then practice environmental law. In preparation for that career, she has joined the pre-legal society and is serving as chief justice of the judicial board for her residence hall complex.

She has made all As, and recently she went by the Phi Beta Kappa office to see what, if any, chance she might have for becoming a member during her senior year. She was told that with all her Advance Placement credit, she would not be able to accumulate a sufficient number of hours at the University to qualify for membership. Her most recent letter reads, "I hope you will not be disappointed, Mother. I will not make Phi Beta Kappa."

Hang on, future freshmen with AP credit. Perhaps at the new Senior Year Experience conferences South Carolina has planned, someone will assess even the sacred ancient traditions of Phi Beta Kappa and make provision for the students of the '90s who are on a fast track through college.

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